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It's Grim Down South: A Scottish Take on the 'English Riots'

As the worst urban disorder in a generation played itself out across English cities, one issue preoccupied politicians, journalists and academics north of the Border: why had there been no riots in Scotland? The First Minister Alex Salmond was quick to make the point that Scotland was unaffected by the riots and continued to be 'open for business'. Salmond and others pointed towards socio-cultural differences between the nations of the United Kingdom as partly explaining the differential spread of the disorder. Scotland also has distinct institutions with particular ways of doing things. Our Police respondents were quick to note that they 'do things differently' in Scotland. This paper takes these claims as its point of departure and offers an analysis of the 'English riots', the Scottish police and the extent to which Scotland is immune to the disorder south of the border.

As some parts of England erupted in the worst urban disorder seen in decades, a rather less serious dispute arose in Scotland over the First Minister's disquiet over the way the riots were being portrayed as a 'UK' problem. Speaking on BBC Radio Scotland, Salmond mused "We know we have a different society in Scotland and one of my frustrations yesterday was to see this being described on BBC television and Sky as 'riots in the UK'" (quoted in Carrell, 2011). He continued:

> Until such time as we do have a riot in Scotland, then what we have seen are riots in London and in English cities. And it is actually unhelpful to see them inaccurately presented, because one of the dangers we face in Scotland is copycat action. It is important that we try and make the distinction. One of the bright spots in the economy right now is the surge in tourist numbers round Scotland. We don't want anything to damage that, so it is really important that we remain vigilant both in terms of our policing and our government, and that we see things properly presented, otherwise we will be caught up economically and socially in the backwash of what's happening south of the Border. (quoted in Hannan, 2001)

Salmond was, apart from being geographically precise, sociologically informed. There can be little doubt that Scotland is socially distinctive from the rest of the United Kingdom, and that such distinctions are both meaningful and important.

Cue though, the reaction. Salmond was being "parochial and petty" according to David Mundell; "small-minded and embarrassing" to Iain Gray.[1] Columnists rushed to condemn Salmond for suggesting Scotland was "violence free" and with "moral superiority built into its national psyche" (Hjul, 2011); that rioting was "an English problem" whilst Scotland was "somehow immune to wider outbreaks of disorder" (Linklater, 2011); with Salmond castigated for "his overweening arrogance and refusal to engage with any but the most parochial of issues" (Cochrane, 2011). So far so predictable. But beyond the hyperbole and invective, it was clear that whether people agreed or disagreed with the First Minister, there were many grounds for taking a pessimistic view: murder, drink, gangs and blades, and – of course – sectarianism. In this paper we will sketch out some possible reasons why Scotland has not witnessed widespread social disorder on the scale witnessed in England; whether

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[1] http://politics.caledonianmercury.com/2011/08/10/salmond-sparks-political-storm-over-unhelpful-riots-comments/

those reasons are 'structural' or 'accidental'; and whether policing in Scotland is well placed to anticipate, contain and handle large scale disorder.

Understanding why the riots did not occur in Scotland rather depends on how one interprets the causes of the unrest in England. For those who have put forward one-dimensional and simplistic explanations, the answer is either puzzling or obvious. If these riots are about 'race', then few places in Scotland have the kind of ethnic mixture, let alone a concentration of disaffected and angry BME youth, that we find in Tottenham's Bridgewater Farm estate. Conversely, for those highlighting deprivation, youth unemployment, or violent gang culture, then there, but for the Grace of God, go the mean streets of Easterhouse, Craigmillar, the Hilltown or downtown Wick. The sociologist Zygman Baumann claimed that what we were witnessing were "not hunger or bread riots. These are riots of defective and disqualified consumers." [2] There are echoes here of Merton's (1938) work on crime. As with other structuralist accounts, though, it begs the question of why such 'defective consumers' in Birmingham, Manchester, Enfield or Ealing chose to loot and burn their shopping districts whilst those in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Motherwell and Linlithgow stayed at home.

Of course there were no 'English riots' but different disturbances in different areas with a variety of underlying and immediate causes. Events in Tottenham sprang from ongoing and deep tensions between the police and the local community, partly relating to race, partly relating to police efforts to combat local criminal gangs. The area (like Brixton and other areas of 'black' London) also has a tense history, and strong cultural memory, of riot. But it would be quite wrong to take Tottenham as a template for, or mirror of, events elsewhere. The west London suburb of Ealing, where there was serious disorder, does not at all match this picture, and neither does Gloucester, a small west of England city, which also saw trouble. In some areas – such as Manchester – we seem to have witnessed criminal gangs deliberately targeting exclusive shops in affluent commercial districts. In others – such as Nottingham – the police were the explicit target. So there is a very varied mixture of (partly racial) tensions between youths and police as in Tottenham and other parts of inner London; more general rebelliousness amongst 'disaffected' young people as in Gloucester, and some London suburbs; and criminal opportunism, as we seem to have seen in Manchester and elsewhere. The notion of 'copycat riots' is unhelpful – it simply does not explain the geographic spread and limitations of the disorder, nor does it do justice to its varying and underlying social causes and contexts. If we really have to identify a singular cause, it is the conjunction of three things: disaffection with economic prospects; serious levels of mistrust between young people and police; and a realisation that when faced with large and mobile numbers of rioters, the police are often powerless to stop looting and arson.

There can be no doubt that many parts of the United Kingdom possess the first and second of these things, and that blanket media coverage over the first few days of unrest amply communicated the third. Nevertheless many parts of Britain - Scotland, Wales, North East England – witnessed no disorder. Why might this be the case, and can we assume that *had* there been such disorder in Scotland's cities that it would have been policed much as the English disorder was? In what follows we draw upon our existing and ongoing work on public order policing in Scotland and England. Though much of this work has focussed on policing and political protest (rather than 'riots') we have gathered a good deal of interview and observational material of public order police 'in action', whether at protests or in

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[2] <http://www.social-europe.eu/2011/08/the-london-riots-on-consumerism-coming-home-to-roost/>

training, and augment it here with informal interviews with three senior Scottish public order commanders with whom we discussed England's riots[3].

The first point to make, of course, is that policing in Scotland takes, even if 'only' at the levels of formal organisation and of Force rhetoric, a Scottish form (Gorringe & Rosie 2010). Commentators and (UK) policy makers routinely talk of 'British policing' in the same way they might talk of 'the British churches', or 'British football'. Salmond's comments, whatever he intended, offered a useful counterpoint to the routine propensity for commentators (including social scientists) to imply 'neatly bounded societies where economic, political and cultural domains or levels map neatly onto to each other' (Walby 2003: 530). Even sociologists (in their habits if not in their theoretical positions) can slip into 'methodological nationalism'. This 'equates societies with nation-state societies and sees states and their governments as the primary focus of social-scientific analysis' (Beck & Sznaider 2006: 3). Like religion and sport, as Donnelly & Scott (2005a: 3) argue, policing in Scotland has its own particular legal, institutional and political contexts. Further, devolution has "undoubtedly increased the tendency towards centralisation in Scottish policing. It has enabled the Scottish Executive to routinely seek national solutions to national problems ….. Like it or not, there is a national flavour to policing in Scotland". (Donnelly & Scott 2005b: 260-61).

We have previously argued that the explicit branding of the policing of 2005's Gleneagles G8 summit *as* 'Scottish' was not, and could not be, a mere *discursive* device (Gorringe & Rosie 2010: 67). Such packaging, of course, has consequences for how the subsequent protest policing was conducted, experienced and interpreted. In our 2005 research, senior and frontline officers repeatedly invoked 'nationalised' ways of policing. Facing conflicting demands - from protestors, local communities, politicians and world leaders – commanders found refuge in the symbolic resources and discursive possibilities of Scottish national identity. This emphasis on *Scottish* policing was a means of tapping into widespread and accepted beliefs as well as an assertion that policing in Scotland is 'distinctive'. Such articulation mirrors the practices of other key social institutions:

> They set apart the space within which rules are set and interactions take place. Their success in so doing helps to naturalise social processes, so that we take for granted that there is a 'Scottish' way of practising law, religion, education, politics and so on (McCrone 2001: 180).

Scotland, McCrone argues "is sustained as a nation because people in Scotland treat it as a more appropriate social and cultural framework for making sense of their lives" (2001: 52).

Our police respondents routinely invoke a 'Scottish tradition of policing', by which they mean: '"Police by consent" and "Nicey, nicey: let's not react …."' (quoted in Gorringe & Rosie 2010: 74). That this is not simply the expression of a localised police mythology nor politicised Scottish Nationalism is clear from multiple public pronouncements. Take, for example, then Justice Minister Cathy Jamieson's assessment of G8 preparations:

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[3] We carried out informal interviews with three senior public order commanders in September 2011. Given the sensitivities of the recent riots we have chosen not to name any of these respondents in this piece.

I believe we have police officers - indeed a policing culture - that can deal effectively with all the challenges ahead. A police service that is drawn from - and reflective of - the best small country in the world. Modern and professional. Fair-minded and tolerant. (Scottish Executive News 2005)

One frontline officer told us: 'Aye, I think I would say that there was a Scottish approach. There is a difference. It's much more about dialogue and community interaction ... as well as the more legal things like the difference in laws between [Scotland and England]" (quoted in Gorringe & Rosie 2010: 74). Such a view goes right to the top. A recent Inspectorate of Constabulary for Scotland (HMICS) report stated that:

> The realisation of *local connections in policing with the community* is a reassertion of the traditional principle "that the police are the public and the public are the police". This has long been rooted in the ethos of policing in Scotland.
> (HMICS 2004: 103, original emphasis).

That report's introduction explicitly asserts Scottish distinctiveness with implicit reference to un-named others (i.e. England): 'Arguably, the Scottish approach is based upon a more traditional community policing model, less driven by top down enforcement targets' (HMICS 2004: 7).

One of the most senior police officers we spoke to in 2005 – then Tayside Chief Constable John Vine - gave a fascinating response to the issue of whether there was a distinctive approach to Scottish Policing: laughter. As with elite figures in Bechhofer et al's (1999: 525) study, Vine (born in Northern England and having spent his formative police career there) seemed relatively 'sensitive to the nuances of national identity claims'. For Vine: "The idea of a distinctively Scottish approach to policing was more for public consumption [and it has] no basis in reality … a fiction ... It was presented as community based, low key; the friendly face of the police" (Interview). Indeed Vine scotched the very idea of a distinctive Scottish mode of policing: 'It's like a fiction to create a distinct identity. It's the same job, no difference". However, as the conversation proceeded and Vine reflected further, he backtracked: "well it's not a fiction, I suppose that's being a bit hard on ourselves, it's what we deliver anyway ... Scotland and Scottish policing tends to be less codified – relies more on discretion". Towards the end of the interview any lingering caution in describing the police as 'Scottish' had evaporated:

> One thing that I have been very surprised about is that the media have been so anti-Scottish, particularly with regards to what benefits might occur ... After the successful completion of the event by anybody's measure, by anybody's measure, we might have expected more . (Interview)

We have focussed here on John Vine's views since they capture and underline the complex processes by which we might understand police in Scotland *as* Scottish. This does not rest on the *methods* of policing adopted (after all, "It's the same job, no difference") but rather as a value-adding *claim* attempting to connect Scotland's police with their publics in a familiar, distinctive and reassuring way.

Given this recurrent and pervasive account, would Scottish police forces deal with widespread disorder, rioting and looting any differently to their counterparts south of the Tweed? The short answer is 'no', not least since all UK public order officers train to a

common minimum standard and there are few ways to adequately deal with such disorder beyond the deployment of massive numbers so as to 'swamp' an area and discourage dispersed crowds from reassembling elsewhere (Interview 2011). Notably the London disorder subsided only when sufficient numbers of public order officers could be assembled from other forces (including those in Scotland) through mutual aid. Only then could the favoured responses to serious disorder across all UK forces – containment, dispersal, arrest – be effectively deployed. Thus, had Strathclyde Police, or Lothian & Borders, or Grampian, been faced with very large numbers of mobile rioters, intent on disorder, looting and arson there is little doubt that they would have acted – or rather reacted - in broadly the same way as the Metropolitan Police, or as the Greater Manchester and West Midlands forces. Likewise, it is probable that Scottish forces would have drawn upon the mutual aid of forces south of the Border in such extreme circumstances, as has happened during the G8 and for recent Scottish Defence League rallies. That said it should be noted that Lothian & Borders Police have highly specialised team to lead their public order operations in case of widespread disorder. Members of this team are highly experienced and carefully screened, with entry into the team dependent upon, amongst other things, excellent and proven communication skills (Interview, 2011).

Yet note that this is only the story of how police would *react* to such an outbreak. The fact remains that such levels of disorder has not been witnessed in Scotland since, perhaps, the Glasgow unemployed worker riot of 1931. Why is it that Scotland's forces have not had to deal with mass disorder of the nature, and on the scale, witnessed in England this summer? In part the answer is likely to lie in the immediate contexts of service cuts in England, particularly as concerns young people – note that just weeks before the riots one third of Haringey's youth centres had closed - longer term issues around ethnic relations and extremes of wealth and poverty, as well as more slippery concepts around social cohesion. As Iain MacWhirter noted:

> We can all hazard a few guesses why young Scots didn't riot: no tuition fees, EMA, enlightened policing, better ethnic integration, a greater sense of community, less glaring divisions in wealth (Edinburgh aside). Maybe all play a part. Maybe it's just too wet for rioting.   MacWhirter (2011)

One issue arising here is the claimed community-oriented style of policing noted above. We have ourselves observed Scottish officers reassure protestors – for example Climate Campers arriving at the Royal Bank's Gogarburn headquarters in 2010 – that 'we are not the Met'. Officers in 'code 1' (full protective equipment, or, in popular parlance 'riot gear') are rarely deployed in Scotland, and very rarely in crowd control situations, Whilst football fans in England & Wales will frequently encounter officers deployed in 'code 1' as a precautionary and/or intimidating 'front line' on the streets outside stadia, Strathclyde Police take pride in never deploying such officers for Old Firm fixtures. We have been repeatedly told by commanders in Strathclyde that their 'first tactic' is 'the smiling face of Strathclyde Police', with the 'softer' skills of communicating with and listening to the public prioritised. Indeed, when, in the wake of London's G20 protests, UK Police were advised to focus on such 'soft' tactics in protest situations, we were repeatedly told by Scottish commanders that '*we already do that here*!' Scottish commanders felt confident that police-community relations are nowhere as strained as in those parts of England where rioting occurred. This was in some part a result of a more community-oriented policing style in Scotland, but also because of socio-structural differences from England.

In speaking to public order commanders specifically about this summer's riots a number of such differences were described, not least the issue of the multiple, and ethnically-bounded, communities to be found in some parts of London. One commander, deployed through 'mutual aid' in north London in the wake of the riots discerned quite different 'feels' to the everyday relationship between police and some of these communities. Many young Black Londoners (particularly, in police parlance, men of African or Afro-Caribbean background, that is Identity Code 3 – 'IC3' - males) were deeply suspicious of, and hostile to police, and refused interaction even if approached in a friendly and open manner. A London-wide Section 60 order gave police powers of stop and search, which infuriated many young black people. Anyone with a passing knowledge of the Black British community – or indeed with British reggae music – will recognise the specific 'cultural memory' resonances of stop and search, not least the contribution of Sus laws to the riots of 1981. Other ethnic minority communities, including Turkish and Albanian, were said to be more sympathetic to, and communicative with, frontline police. Scotland simply does not face this complex and 'historic' history regarding ethnic minorities and policing.

Other commanders suggested that young disadvantaged Scots lack "a banner or unifying cause to rally round" and voice their disaffection (Interviews, 2011). Whilst young people in Tottenham and elsewhere in England have a real (and often personalised) history of racism, aggressive policing and ethnic tensions to rally around, this is not the case to the same extent in Scotland. Our respondents recognised the deep-rooted social problems that contributed to many of the disturbances in England – racism, a lack of economic prospects even amongst working class people who 'had done the right thing' and worked hard to secure an education, and a rampant consumerism that left the disadvantaged ever further behind (Interviews, 2011). None of these issues are strangers to Scotland. As one commentator noted:

> Inequality and a sense of hopelessness do not excuse rioting but they may go some way to explaining it. Scotland might like to think it is a more equal society, but there is a long way to go. More than 200,000 children still live in poverty and Sir Fred Goodwin still has his massive pension. Swanson (2011)

There is – of course – no doubt that Scotland possesses a violent underbelly, based on alcohol, masculinity, gangs and blades. Scotland's – and in particular Glasgow's - murder rate remains higher than the UK average, and a gang culture, often armed with machetes and knives, remains strong across the west of Scotland. Gang members frequently attack each other, but seldom take on the police. Such gang-on-gang violence divides the disaffected rather than rallying them. As one commander with wide experience in policing Glasgow told us: "That's Scotland's Shame – nobody cares since it's only a gang member [getting stabbed]" (Interview, 2011). Youth territorialism is not limited to the West. Officers based in the East of Scotland also spoke of intense and parochial youth rivalries based on territory: "being from Granton rather than Royston outweighs many other things" (Interview, 2011). All the respondents felt that there was less 'anonymity' in Scotland, with police more likely to know the names and faces of those they are policing, and to be more clued up about 'bad sorts' in the community. To some extent a key difference in policing urban communities in Scotland rather than England is one of scale: in parts of England there are bigger housing estates containing deep-seated and widespread deprivation, more people willing to physically confront police and different ethnic factors and fault lines. Such estates in Scotland, particularly in Edinburgh, tend to be located on the outskirts of towns and cities, some distance from commercial districts.

In Scotland a smaller social scale means that disorderly behaviour is less anonymous, and thus perpetrators realise that they may be more likely to be arrested when they 'cross the line'. In the 'larger' and more anonymous context of London, we were told, police were less confident about just who it was they were policing, and thus tended to be more defensively minded. This has led, over decades, into a 'chicken and egg' situation whereby defensive policing leads to poorer community relations, leading again into a position where police tend to act defensively. Such a dynamic can only worsen during times of sharp economic misery.

Officers thus felt than a conjunction of different factors characterised the policing of Scotland's urban communities, as contrasted to those in England. This however did not lead to complacency. Officers pointed out that Scotland was, in many ways, a violent society, and noted events where it was clear that members of the public were willing – indeed keen – to physically confront police (Interviews, 2011). There were some tense and violent confrontations around 2005's G8; Rangers fans rioting in Manchester in 2008 had few qualms in attacking police officers; and an unofficial Royal Wedding party in Kelvingrove Park descended into violence three months before the unrest in England. Officers conceded that many areas of Scotland "have local tensions so could have local outbreaks", although these would be unlikely to spread without some sort of common and unifying cause or grievance. That – at the moment at least – appears to be absent. Scottish police forces, of course, were prepared for possibility that the Summer rioting would spread to Scotland. One commander told us that there was no clear intelligence of any likely trouble in his urban district: "I was quite relaxed [although] we had plans. Never be complacent"

The First Minister, in other words, was right to caution that the unrest could spread north. However, just as these were not 'UK' riots, neither were they straightforwardly 'English'. The riots down South, as we have shown, were not simply 'copy-cat' events, but took on a specific character and dynamic in each location. And, as one of our respondents put it; 'the conditions for social unrest are ripe in Scotland' (Interview, 2011). From our interviews and analysis, therefore, we contend that any urban disorder we might witness north of the Border will not simply offer a distant echo of England's riots. Rather than being 'caught up in the backwash' of events elsewhere, such disorder would arise from the specificities of social deprivation, police relations and political history in our Scottish towns and cities.

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See note 3 on our more recent interviews.

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